

... that in 2012 Vladimir Putin signed into force five new Russian laws that restrict the civil and political rights of Russian civil society, including those of religious communities?

Protests erupted across the Russian Federation, but particularly in Moscow, after Vladimir Putin returned to the Russian presidency in March 2012 in an election widely viewed as rigged. In response to these major demonstrations, Putin signed a raft of new legislation into force that created harsh new penalties for independent political activity, which also impacts religious freedom. USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett and USCIRF Senior Policy Analyst Catherine Cosman visited Moscow in September 2012. The policy brief, “[Russia: Unruly State of Law](#),” details findings from this trip.

In June, Putin signed the first bill into law that imposes new administrative fines, which could amount to more than the average annual salary, on individuals taking part in unauthorized public gatherings that violate “public order.” By September 2012, Forum 18 reported that the law had already been used against several religious communities. A Pentecostal pastor was fined for holding a religious service. In addition, in the north Caucasus republic of Adygea, the FSB security service ordered the closure of a Muslim prayer room and Muslims in two other locations were warned that their Eid-ul-Fitr ceremonies in rented premises must conform to the new law.

Following in July, a second law signed by Putin required foreign-funded non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) involved in political activity to register as “foreign agents.” The law requires that the phrase “foreign agents” -- with its negative Soviet-era connotations -- be included in all materials produced by such NGOs. Failure to comply is punishable by heavy fines or even a two-year prison sentence. Most Russian human rights NGOs, including *Memorial*, have indicated that they will not register as “foreign agents.” On November 21 -- the day the new NGO law came into force -- some human rights groups found the phrase “foreign agent” spray-painted across their office buildings. While Russian human rights groups that publicize religious freedom violations are not exempt from the new law, religious groups are, according to the SOVA Center. The new NGO law also penalizes groups alleged to have harmed public health -- a charge sometimes brought against Protestant-run health charities. Russian human rights activists informed USCIRF that an NGO coalition will challenge the new law in the ECtHR.

The third new law, also signed in July, increases government control of the internet. The law creates a federal website blacklist, and requires site owners and internet operators to shut down any listed site. RFE/RL reported that 181 internet sites had been closed by November. Even before the new law, access to certain websites had been restricted. For example, the independent Moscow-based Portal-credo.ru website, which discusses religious freedom, has been blocked for years. In addition, internet providers in Russian regions such as Chechnya, Volgograd and Omsk have had their access blocked to the YouTube site hosting the controversial “Innocence of Muslims” video. According to the SOVA Center, internet advocacy of the superiority of non-violent religious views accounted for half of the convictions for alleged extremism in 2012.

July also saw the passage of the fourth new law that criminalizes certain types of libel, particularly against officials such as the police. Unlike the criminal libel law overturned by then-President Medvedev, the new law introduces harsh administrative fines. Media libel is now subject to a fine of up to 2 million rubles (USD 61,000), while a person who is convicted of libel by false accusations of a major crime will be fined up to 5 million rubles (USD 153,000). One likely goal of the new law is to limit the opportunities for criticism of public officials, including those who may have acted in an arbitrary way towards religious communities.

Finally, and most disturbingly, on November 13, Putin signed into law amendments to the treason bill -- the same day that he told the new Presidential Human Rights Council that he might not sign it in its current form. The new law amends the Criminal Code with a new article prosecuting illegal access to information considered state secrets, amends three current articles, on state treason, espionage, and disclosure of state secrets, and amends the Code of Criminal Procedure, so that all cases brought under the new criminal code now come under Federal Security Service jurisdiction, according to the Law Library of Congress.

Problematically, the law also expands the legal definition of high treason from acts that endanger state security to include those that undermine Russia's "constitutional order, sovereignty, and territorial and state integrity." Moreover, Russian citizens who furnish financial, material, technical, consultative or other help to a foreign state or an international or foreign organization now face possible 20-year prison terms. Also under the new law, Russian citizens who participate in international human rights conferences or supply information on religious rights violations to international organizations potentially are liable for criminal prosecution as traitors.